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TO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PARLIAMENT REAUTHORIZES IRAQ DEPLOYMENT
FOR ANOTHER YEAR

REF: A. A) YEREVAN 1677

1B. B) USDAO YEREVAN 201320Z NOV 06
1C. C) USDAO YEREVAN 011403Z DEC 06

11. The National Assembly voted December 6 to reauthorize the Armenia's troop deployment to Iraq. The 85-19 vote followed two days of vigorous debate, and the personal appearance of Defense Minister Serzh Sargsian who debated with some skeptical deputies the wisdom of the deployment on the parliament floor. Sargsian portrayed Armenia's continued deployment as important to maintaining Armenia's credibility as a reliable partner of the United States and the international community. He also pointed out that Armenia's contribution is modest in comparison to the troop deployments of regional rivals Azerbaijan and Georgia, each of which have sent both larger contingents and combatant troops to Iraq. The junior governing coalition partner, the nationalist ARF Dashnaktsutyun party, joined the parties of the "Justice" opposition alliance in opposition to the deployment extension. The ARF concern is that Armenia's deployment potentially endangers ethnic-Armenian minority populations in nearby Arab states, in which the U.S.-led troop presence in Iraq is unpopular.

12. Armenia's contingent of almost 50 soldiers (doctors/medics, deminers, and truck drivers) are attached to the Polish-commanded Multi-National Division-Central South (MND-CS). Armenia is on its fourth six-month troop rotation in Iraq. Armenia suffered its first Iraq casualty November 11, when First Lieutenant Nalbandian lost part of a leg to an IED attack (Ref B).

13. COMMENT: Sargsian's recent Iraq visit to the Armenian troops and with U.S. and Iraqi commanders (Ref C) enhanced both his personal commitment and domestic political credibility on the Iraq deployment issue. Sargsian's ruling Republican Party's overwhelming control of the National Assembly, combined with Sargsian's personal backing, led to the lopsided vote in favor of the deployment extension. The outcome belies a significant strain of skepticism among Armenian parliamentarians, and generally negative public opinion, about the wisdom of putting Armenian troops into harm's way in Iraq.

GODFREY